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## ***Shir ha-Shirim: Song of Songs Conference***

Wednesday 24 June - Friday 26 June 2026

at

**Faculty of Asian and African Cultures**

(former Faculty of Oriental Studies)

**Department of Hebrew Studies**

**University of Warsaw**

(Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28 - 'Chopin' Building: 'Schayer' Hall 1:21)

### ***SONG OF SONGS SUNG AND READ INTERTEXTUALLY AND EXEGETICALLY***

#### **Program & Abstracts**

#### **Wednesday - June 24**

10:00–10:30: Registration

10:30–10:45: **Opening of the Conference**

#### **Session I (10:45– 12:45)**

10:45–11:15: **Stefan Fischer** (University of Vienna / University of the Free State, Bloemfontein)

*Song of Songs - Recent developments in Research.*

This paper provides a review of contemporary developments in the study of the Song of Songs, which remains highly popular. On the one hand, there is a return and continuation of traditional approaches. Alongside literal interpretation, a neo-allegorical approach is supported. Cognitive linguistics has provided new insights.

Looking beyond the horizons of biblical scholarship into neighbouring cultures, the study encompasses Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek and other texts spanning a wide period, which are analysed in terms of their motifs and genres.

There is significant interest in the history of reception, encompassing patristic writings, Christian interpretations during the Middle Ages, and various Jewish studies, all of which contribute to a richer understanding of the spiritual dimensions of the Song of Songs.

11:15–11:45: **Łukasz Kaluźny** (University of Warsaw)

*Reading Love Cognitively: Metaphor and Embodied Meaning in the Song of Songs.*

The Song of Songs is often regarded as the most beautiful love poem of the Bible. Written in ancient Biblical Hebrew, it is a linguistically and poetically complex text whose dense imagery and metaphorical language can make it appear difficult to approach in the context of Biblical Hebrew instruction. In this speech, I will suggest that precisely this metaphorical richness makes the text a valuable resource for teaching and interpretation.

Drawing on insights from cognitive linguistics, I will focus on selected metaphors related to love, such as LOVE IS ILLNESS, LOVE IS UNITY, and LOVE IS A POWERFUL FORCE OR EMOTION. From a cognitive perspective, these expressions are not merely decorative

poetic devices but reflect deeper conceptual structures. They reveal how abstract experience is understood through more concrete, embodied domains, shaped by shared human cognition. Although the Song of Songs is not a long text, it contains a dense network of metaphorical expressions rooted in human experience. By highlighting these conceptual patterns, I aim to show how Biblical Hebrew can be taught not only as a grammatical system, but also as a meaningful framework for understanding how language structures thought. The speech will demonstrate that the poetic complexity of the text is not an obstacle, but an opportunity for deeper linguistic and interpretive engagement.

11:45–12:15: **Marianna Slavikova** (Charles University, Prague)

*Love as the core of covenant theology in the prophets compared with passionate erotic love as an image of God's love.*

In the beginning of this paper I will focus on verbal terms of love that share a common part of the verbal root. Then I will stay at some biblical texts in the prophets where we can note love as the core of covenant theology. I would like to compare my discoveries with passionate erotic love which is very visible in Song of Songs. At the end I will show how love, together with its erotic counterpart can be visible as the core of covenant theology, and also how in some biblical passage they coexist. I want to show how a passionate erotic love which is on the outside of the formal framework of the covenant is the image of God's love. This paper will be greatly influenced by ideas of Manfred Oeming.

(break)

**Session II** (14:45–16:15)

14:45–15:15: **Eva Vymětalová Hrabáková** (Charles University, Prague)

*The language of trees, the whisper of stones, and the conversation between heaven and earth as a song of desire/longing: performative probes into the Song of Songs' sounds in dialogue with Ugaritic resonances.*

In this contribution, we will focus primarily on elucidating the following connections: "the language of trees" (KTU 1.3 III 22-23), "the whisper of stones" (KTU 3 1.3 III 23), and the parallelism expressed by "the conversation between earth and sky, abysmal lakes with stars" (KTU 3 1.3 III 24-25) /cosmological resonance/ in the form of sounds and tones in the Ugaritic Baal cycle. What lies behind the sounds of natural and cosmic scenes? The presence of this hidden melody of earthly and cosmic music may also appear in the Song of Songs in the voices of the loved one and the lover, and I will attempt to substantiate this assumption. The method I have chosen for my purpose is performativity, which has been widely used in recent years in a number of studies, including the interpretation of biblical and Old Semitic texts. The secondary objective of this paper will be a critical evaluation of the performative method and the limits of its use. The main goal will be to present the sounds and tones of creation that attract people, turn their attention to the transcendent, and lead them back to the sound expression of lived reality.

15:15–15:45: **Caleb Harris** (Charles University, Prague)

*Resheph and Aphrodite in Song of Songs.*

This paper will engage with recent scholarship that takes a mythological approach to Song of Songs, either to the book as a whole or certain passages. Song 8:6 in particular, and related verses will be discussed. I will suggest that perhaps the Song attempts to delegitimise the cults of Aphrodite and Resheph which were popular on Cyprus during the 5th–3rd centuries BCE. The Resheph cult appears to have expanded and encroached upon territory which viewed by Judahs as land belonging to Yahweh and his cult by the founding of the city Apollonia-Arsuf during the Persian period. Though, the focus of the song appears to be on the goddess cult. Aphrodite appears to be a prime candidate for the divine consort of Resheph on Cyprus during this period.

15:45–16:15: **Jaco Gericke** (North West University, RSA)

*Song of Songs and the Philosophy of Love.*

In the Song of Songs, love is not only the English translation of a Hebrew word, it is also a concept that is present even when the word is not. But what, according to the text, was love assumed to be? No clarification of the concept is found in the language of the biblical text itself. A look at related research, however, reveals that this question has already received a variety of answers in the idioms of different second-order auxiliary discourses available to biblical scholars. These included, but are not limited to, disciplines and theoretical frameworks in linguistics, literary-criticism, comparative-religion, psychology, anthropology, sociology, theology, and philosophy. A gap in related research has been identified in the context of philosophical approaches to love in the Song, which up until now have focussed primarily on bringing to bear ideas in ancient philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, value theory and the philosophy of sex. In this paper, the original contribution made lies in the way the presentation brings to bear neglected themes from one of the lesser known philosophical sub-disciplines, i.e., the philosophy of love (in the analytic tradition). The presentation will comprise of three stages. In the first stage I shall seek to clarify the concept of love in the Song(s) exegetically by identifying some of the thematically relevant folk-metaphysical, epistemological, ethical and other assumptions incidentally implicit in the ontology of the text's natural language. Second, the findings of stage one will then be compared, by way of a brief meta-commentary, to viewpoints in earlier related philosophical research on the concept of love in the Song. Third, the combined findings of stages one and two will then be used as frame of reference for whatever remains in terms of neglected philosophical periods, persons, presuppositions, problems and perspectives in the contemporary philosophy of love.

(break)

**Session III** (16:45– 17:45)

16:45– 17:15: **Christo Lombaard** (University of Pretoria)

*Integrating Song of Songs in the "Bible and sex"– genre: an overview and a South African case study.*

In 1979, JH Kroeze (snr.) published the book "Bybel en seks" as an attempted even-handed portrayal, to present fairly to a conservative Afrikaans readership different aspects of the biblical literature on matters of sexuality. Naturally, Song of Songs was included — as always the case with this kind of book. In the proposed contribution, the manner in which Song of Songs is indeed drawn on in this genre of popular-academic writing on the Bible and sex, is reviewed. Core characteristics are indicated. Then, the by now almost forgotten 1979-Kroeze book is analysed at the hand of these characteristics, from which analysis suggestions are made on strengths and weaknesses in Kroeze's approach, towards continuing this genre in our, now, much-changed world.

17:15–17:45: **Magdalena Wdowiak** (University of Warsaw)

*Bodily Imagery and Allegorical Interpretation in Canticles 1:2b: Tannaitic Exegesis and Origen's Commentary.*

This article offers a comparative analysis of the allegorical interpretation of bodily imagery in Canticles 1:2b ("bona ubera tua super vinum") in Tannaitic exegesis and in Origen's Commentary on the Song of Songs. Focusing on bodily imagery, specifically the metaphor of the "breasts," the study examines how both traditions mobilize corporeal language as a trigger for allegorical interpretation. In the Tannaitic corpus, particularly Sifre Devarim Pisqa 48, the verse functions within a broader exegetical framework concerned with Torah study, preservation, and transmission, employing bodily and liquid metaphors to articulate the life-giving and obligating character of divine teaching. Origen, by contrast, begins with the corporeal imagery generated by the Greek rendering of *dodim* as *mastoi* and progressively

abstracts it into anthropological and doctrinal categories, culminating in the notion of the *principale cordis* as the locus of Christ's hidden wisdom. The comparison does not presuppose direct literary dependence but highlights shared exegetical strategies operating within overlapping interpretive cultures. Bodily imagery thus emerges as a common hermeneutical grammar through which both rabbinic and early Christian interpreters articulate the superiority of divine teaching, while orienting it toward distinct theological and communal horizons.

17:45– 18:15: **Ndikho Mtshiselwa** (University of South Africa, Pretoria)

*Unlocking the Politics of Money, Body and Love in Song of Songs through Fifty Shades of Grey and Lwah Ndlunkulu's Song, Notification (feat. Big Zulu).*

Preachers often avoid preaching on Song of Songs in their local churches for various reasons which include, but not limited to, 1) cultural sensitivity, 2) explicitly erotic nature of the book, and 3) the female body being on display in the book. Yet, the canonisation of the Song points to its importance and relevance to societies as well as to its authoritative nature for faith and morals. The economics of Songs of Songs presents the complex interplay between the money, body and love, which in turn reflects a grey intersection between economic, sexual, social and personal dimensions. The paper sets out to draw on the Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy by E.L. James, specifically on the place of money, freedom of sexuality expression, and love to navigate a life affirming interpretation of Song of Songs 8. In addition, the study draws on the song, Notification by Lwah Ndlunkulu, featuring Siyabonga Nene (known professionally as Big Zulu) to examine the interaction between the economic, gender and sexuality, social as well as romantic love depictions in the text. The song, Notification, contains the contestation between the place of money, masculinity and femininity, ethical behaviour and love in a romantic relationship.

#### Thursday - June 25

**Session IV** (9:15– 10:45)

09:15–09:45: **Lukáš Klíma** (Charles University, Prague)

*The Song of Songs within the Hebrew canon (תנ"ך). Terminological and motivic intertextuality.*

The Song of Songs differs significantly from other biblical narratives. It presents an alternative conception of the meaning of eroticism. This makes the connection between the Song of Songs and certain texts of the Hebrew canon all the more remarkable. These are primarily certain motifs in chapters 2–4 of the Book of Genesis, certain motifs in the Book of Proverbs, and we also find the same mythological background in motifs in the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32). The lecture traces these differences and connections based on the Hebrew terminology used.

09:45–10:15: **Aleksandr Farutin** (previously University of Warsaw)

*A Possible Editorial Tendency in 4Q107 (4QCantb).*

4Q107, originating from the first century BCE, is the earliest of the four Song of Songs manuscripts discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The text of the book in this scroll most likely began with the Masoretic verse 2:9b and ended with Masoretic 5:1, and it contained numerous minuses compared to the *textus receptus* in between. In addition to representing a different macrotextual edition of the text, the extant portions of the manuscript contain significant textual variants at the microtextual level, some of which will be examined in the paper. An attempt will be made to determine whether the text of the manuscript reflects a conscious editorial policy consisting of eliminating potentially inconvenient associations with certain passages in other texts, such as, i.e., 1 Enoch, the Rule of the Community, Proverbs, and 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman.

10:15– 10:45: **Filip Sylwestrowicz** (Warsaw Baptist Theological Seminary, previously UW)  
*The Song of Songs and Paul's Theology of Marriage: Exploring Possible Connections.*

In 1 Cor 7:1–40, the apostle Paul addresses a series of issues pertaining to sexuality, marriage, celibacy, and divorce. In this context, he exhorts married couples not to neglect sexual intimacy, grounding this instruction in the mutual authority spouses exercise over each other's bodies (7:3–5). Could this emphasis on mutual and reciprocal belonging reflect the influence of passages from the Song of Songs (2:16; 6:3; 7:10)? This paper explores the possible influence of the Song of Songs on Paul's theology and ethics of marriage and sexuality.

(break)

**Session V (11:15–12:45)**

11:15–11:45: **Judy Lam** (University of the Free State, Bloemfontein)  
*The Poetics of Soul Care: An Intertextual Reading of the Vineyard Metaphor in the Song of Songs.*

The Poetics of Soul Care reflects an integration of biblical poetics from the Song of Songs and experiential insights from the practice of spiritual direction. Its soulful approach is distinct from general self-care resources and therapeutic models, and its effectiveness has been demonstrated in more than twenty years of spiritual retreats in diverse multicultural settings.

Based on an intertextual reading of the vineyard metaphor, this paper highlights ways in which the embodied vineyard has informed my understanding of the process of spiritual transformation, namely: from neglect and depletion (Sg 1:6) to a cultivated and generative vineyard (Sg 8:12). Following this transformative paradigm, the significance of the vineyard metaphor for holistic soul care, particularly at the crucial mid-life juncture, will be delineated progressively. First, as an invitation to examine the condition of one's own vineyard. Second, as permission to attend to one's neglected soul, where overextending in service of others mitigates against this vital need. Third, a prerogative for responsible soul stewardship emerges from painful experiences of deprivation, disconnection, desolation, and darkness. Fourth, a conscious practice that cultivates holy rhythms within wholesome communities.

11:45–12:15: **Pavla Damohorská** (Charles University, Prague)  
*The Erotic Symbols of Song of Songs in the Jewish Exegetical Literature.*

The description of the physical beauty of the female heroine of the Song of Songs is an integral part of this biblical book. Within the historical-allegorical approach of Jewish scholars to this book, it was necessary to apply this approach also to the different parts of the female body mentioned in Song of Songs.

Already Mekilta of Rabbi Yishmael links the expression “your two breasts” from Song 4.5 with two tablets of stone. Rashi explains the expression to mean two tablets of the covenant, or two functions - royal and high priestly. Another rabbis understand it as symbol for another couple – Moses and Aharon. However, the interpretation of these symbols varies among rabbinical scholars.

The following paper is going to explore how the explanation of these expressions developed and changed over the centuries in the Jewish exegetical literature and how it was reflected in other religious texts.

12:15– 12:45: **Anna Kuśmirek** (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Warsaw)  
*Metaphors of Fragrance and Incense in the Song of Songs and Targum: Between Sensuality and Cultic Reinterpretation.*

This paper examines the semantic and theological development of olfactory imagery in the Masoretic Text and its Aramaic rendering in Targum Shir ha-Shirim. By analyzing key passages (1:3, 3:6, 4:10–14, 5:13), I explore how terms associated with scent and incense (e.g., , ריח

and their Aramaic equivalents (ריחא, בוסמין, קטורת) shift from an erotic and sensory register to a cultic and covenantal one. The study applies semantic and intertextual methodology, with particular attention to referential shifts and exegetical expansion within the Targumic tradition.

The paper aims to contribute to current discussions on how the Song was reread within Jewish interpretive communities and how metaphorical language becomes a vehicle for theological reframing.

(break)

15:00– 18:00: An internal conference program (for registered participants)

### Friday - June 26

#### Session VI (9:15 – 10:45)

09:15–09:45: **David Biernot** (Charles University, Prague / University of Pretoria)

*Erotic Language and Prophetic Consciousness: Abulafia's Hermeneutics of the Song of Songs.*

Avraham Abulafia, the 13th-century founder of ecstatic or prophetic Kabbalah, developed a mystical program aimed at renewing prophecy through techniques designed to expand consciousness and achieve conjunction with the lowest of the so-called “separate intelligences” emanating from God - the Active Intellect. Drawing on Maimonides’ rational account of prophecy, Abulafia interpreted prophecy as the union of the perfected human intellect with the Active Intellect. His practices - letter permutation (tzeruf), vocalization of divine names, controlled breathing, and intense concentration on linguistic forms - were intended to induce altered states of awareness in which the practitioner could experience prophetic influx. In this respect, his techniques may be compared, analogically, to modern methods aimed at expanded consciousness, such as holotropic breathing or psychedelic-assisted experiences. However, Abulafia’s system remains firmly grounded in disciplined textual and linguistic meditation.

Within this framework, the Song of Songs occupies a distinctive role in Abulafia’s hermeneutics. Rather than reading the text primarily as a traditional allegory of love between God and Israel, he treats its language as a symbolic and linguistic map of intellectual conjunction. Verses describing longing, dialogue, and union between the lovers are interpreted as encoding the relationship between the human intellect and the Active Intellect. Thus, the verse “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (Song 1:2) is interpreted as the moment of intellectual contact mediated through articulated speech, since prophetic influx is transmitted through letters and sounds produced by the mouth.

In works such as *Otzar Eden Ganuz*, Abulafia further integrates phrases from the Song into his combinatory techniques. The verse “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (Song 6:3) becomes both a symbolic formula of intellectual reciprocity and a source for permutation. The word אני (“I”) can be permuted into אין (“nothingness”), expressing the dissolution of the ordinary self that precedes prophetic union, while דודי (“my beloved”) offers consonantal structures suitable for rhythmic vocal permutations. Through such operations, the erotic language of the Song of Songs becomes integrated into Abulafia’s practical hermeneutics, functioning simultaneously as philosophical allegory, symbolic description of ecstatic experience, and linguistic material for contemplative practice.

09:45–10:15: **Marzena Zawadowska** (University of Warsaw)

*Song of Songs as a historical text in a Medieval Karaite Bible Commentary.*

A famous passage from the Mishnah (Yadaim 3:5) discusses the books that “defile the hands,” meaning they are holy and therefore part of the canon of Hebrew Scriptures. In this discussion, rabbi Akiva is reported to have said: “No man in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs does not defile the hands. For the whole world is not as worthy as the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.” This exceptionally high status for the Song of Songs is explained by traditional Jewish

interpretations, later collected in the classical rabbinic midrash *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* (c. 6th century CE), where the book is read allegorically as a description of the covenantal love between God and Israel rather than literally as a romantic poem. In this reading, the female beloved represents Israel, and the male lover symbolizes God. Their expressions of longing, union, separation, and reunion are understood as metaphors for the spiritual history of the relationship between God and Israel. Rabbinic commentators often interpret the poem's imagery in connection with key historical moments: the beloved emerging from the wilderness evokes Israel's journey from Egypt; the lover's presence in the garden symbolizes God dwelling among Israel in the Tabernacle or Temple; and episodes of separation reflect periods of exile and spiritual distance. In this way, the poetic dialogue becomes a symbolic narrative of the covenant, portraying both divine love and Israel's ongoing hope for reconciliation and redemption.

Medieval Karaite exegesis inherited and continued this allegorical tradition but added an additional layer of historical interpretation. They subjected the Song of Songs to actualizing interpretations, seeking references to the history of their own movement within the biblical text. As a result, the narrative of the text in medieval Karaite Bible commentaries becomes a blueprint of the Karaites' own history as righteous individuals within Israel, stretching from antiquity to the commentators' own time. It has been suggested that this actualizing method, employed not only for the Song of Songs but also for other biblical books with established metaphorical interpretations, may have been inspired by the Qumranic *pesher*. Without engaging in the debate over the origins of this method, I will focus on selected passages from Karaite commentaries on the Song of Songs composed in the 10th century, in which their authors seek to recount the history of their movement in an attempt to reconstruct the medieval Karaites' vision of their past. In doing so, I will argue that the traditional story of Anan ben David (8th c.) as the founder of Karaism was not an original Karaite invention, but rather a later narrative adopted under the influence of Rabbanite authors, such as Saadia Gaon.

10:15–10:45: **Marek Baraniak** (University of Warsaw)

*The Messiah in the Targum Shir haShirim.*

The Targum to the Song of Songs (Targum Canticles) allegorises the biblical poem, interpreting it as a history of the relationship between God and Israel, covering the period from the Exodus to the coming of "King Messiah" and the third Temple's reconstruction. It presents the distinct messianic figures of the 'two redeemers': the Messiah son of David and the Messiah son of Ephraim (or Joseph) (Tg Song 4:5; 7:4). The Targumist likens the coming 'two redeemers' in an allegorical interpretation to the former deliverers Moses and Aaron. In addition, in this text, there is also mention of the 'King Messiah' (Tg Song 1:8.17; 7:14; 8:1.4), who will be 'revealed' to Israel (Tg Song 8:1). So did the Targumist have two, three or only one Messiah in mind? Some perspectives, including certain interpretations of Dead Sea Scrolls, point to a tripartite structure: the Prophet (like Moses), the Priest, and the King. This paper attempts to answer these questions and describes how this allegorical interpretation of the Hebrew text was came about.

(break)

**Session VII** (11:15 – 12:45) [with online presentations]

11:15–11:45: **Manickam Kumar** (St Peter's Pontifical Institute, Bangalore)

*Scared Love songs of Tamil Literature and Book of Song of Songs: A Cry for Gender Equality and Individual Human Dignity.*

No other book of the Bible (may be except the book of Revelation) suffers under so many different interpretations as the Song of Songs. G. Fohrer rightly noted that the "history of interpretation of the Song of Solomon is no feather in the cap of biblical exegesis." The major approaches are: the allegorical interpretation, the dramatic interpretation, (two character interpretation or three character interpretation), historical interpretation, cultic interpretation, funerary interpretation, funerary interpretation, wedding interpretation and love song interpretation. By way of simile and metaphor the book expresses even the strongest and most

private of emotions of conjugal love can be expressed in an appropriate, sacred and descriptive manner. There are two beautiful and strong poetic symbol namely 'king,' and 'shepherd' applied the male partner, Whether the female partner is explicated as shepherdess and queen are immaterial but the sacred love between them is told without exaggerating either of them. That's where this presentation draws our kind attention. Sex is impartial and equal; there gender domination is unacceptable. The Shîr hā shîrîm in the midst of intense love making and romanticizing cries for gender equality and individual dignity.

The themes and the theology of the Davidian Literary piece Andāl Thîrurvembāvāi very much agrees in many ways with Shîr hā shîrîm. Andāl Thîrurvembāvāi, belonging to 8th century, is a vaishnavite tradition's Tamil version. Lord Krishna's devotee considers herself as the beloved sings 30 pāsûrangal (stanzas) each one has to be sung throughout the month of Margazhi (December) praising Lord Krishna, the Chief God of the Hindu religion. In the midst of the songs of Andāl there are finest expressions stating her passionate love for Lord Krishna. There is intimacy, ecstasy and even erotic fibers. In the midst of the expressions what we do not notice is there is no male chauvinistic idea, or any expressions of gender domination. Here no one dictates the other. Individual dignity and equality is at least subtly insisted. Which is one of the very important quality and requisite of any erudite community. This paper presentation will explore with proper

11:45– 12:15: **Peter Ignatius** (Jnana Deepa, Institute for Philosophy and Theology, Pune).

*Wine of Love and the Dark One: Conjugal Imagery in the Song of Songs and the Bhakti Devotion of Mīrābāī to Kṛṣṇa.*

This paper comparatively examines conjugal imagery in the biblical Song of Songs and Mīrābāī's devotional poetry to Kṛṣṇa. Drawing on feminist hermeneutics and post-colonial literary theory, it argues that the "wine of love" and the "dark one" function not as ornamental metaphors but as embodied modes of religious knowing. The study explores erotic imagery, motifs of longing and union, and gendered voice to show that bridal-lover language serves as a double-edged discourse for female agency and theological voice—simultaneously licensing and constraining women's desire in both Abrahamic and Hindu devotional traditions.

(break)

**Session VIII (14:00-15:00)** [plenary]

14:00-14:45: **Closing Session**

15:00: **End of the Conference**

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### Conference Organisers

**Marek Baraniak**

(University of Warsaw)

**David Biernot**

(Charles University, Prague)

**Stefan Fischer**

(University of Vienna)

**Christo Lombaard**

(University of Pretoria)

Conference Secretary: **Łukasz Kałużny** (University of Warsaw)